

How to Distinguish the Important Differences Between Teams and Work Groups

by Marie J. Kane

Before you embark on any kind of team development, it is critical that you understand the implications of the differences between teams and work groups.

Is your group a real team or a work group or something in between? How you approach development of your team or group will differ depending on the nature of the group, its mission and what therefore they must address to operate effectively. A group's understanding and application of this difference significantly enhances its developmental process. A group needs to establish what kind of group it is presently and what kind of group it aspires to be or to maintain.

Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith in their 1993 book [The Wisdom of Teams](#) provide excellent, very usable distinctions among the kinds of groups currently operating in organizations.

Team, Working Group or Neither?

1. **Working group:** No significant incremental performance need or opportunity that would require it to become a team. The members interact primarily to share information, best practices, or perspectives and to make decisions to help each individual perform within his or her area of responsibility. There is no call for either a team approach or a mutual accountability requirement.
2. **Pseudo-team:** This is a group for which there could be a significant, incremental performance need or opportunity, but it has not focused on collective performance and is not really trying to achieve it. It has no interest in shaping a common purpose or set of performance goals, even though it may call itself a team. Pseudo-teams are the weakest of all groups in terms of performance impact. In pseudo-teams, the sum of the whole is less than the potential of the individual parts. They almost always contribute less to company performance needs than working groups because their interactions detract from each member's individual performance without delivering any joint benefits. For a pseudo-team to have the option of becoming a potential team, the group must define goals so it has something concrete to do as a team that is a valuable contribution to the company.
3. **Potential team:** There is a significant, incremental performance need, and it really is trying to improve its performance impact. Typically it requires more clarity about purpose, goals, or work products and more discipline in hammering out a common working approach. It has not yet established collective accountability.

Potential teams abound in organizations. When a team (as opposed to a working group) approach makes sense, the performance impact can be high. The steepest performance gain comes between a potential team and a real team; but any movement up the slope is worth pursuing.

4. **Real team:** This is a small number of people with complementary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose, goals, and working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. Real teams are a basic unit of performance. The possible performance impact for the real team is significantly higher than the working group.

5. **High-performance team:** This is a group that meets all the conditions of real teams and has members who are also deeply committed to one another's personal growth and success. That commitment usually transcends the team. The high performance team significantly outperforms all other like teams, and outperforms all reasonable expectations given its membership. It is a powerful possibility and an excellent model for all real and potential teams.

The definitions above are used in the T·E·A·M·S manual (Executive Evolution's team survey, development and continuous improvement process) with permission of Harvard Business School Press, from [Wisdom of Teams](#) by Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, Copyright 1993.

These distinctions between team and work group are very important, because the operating level of a group affects:

1. The ability of groups of people to contribute to their organization
2. The levels of personal growth and satisfaction of group members
3. The return on resources (time, talent, money, etc.) expended by the group
4. The requirements for operating, growing and maintaining the group

The Differences Between a Work Group and a Real Team

A careful study of the preceding definitions reveals fundamental factors that distinguish between work groups and real teams. These factors are the presence or absence of:

- (1) an incremental performance need or opportunity
- (2) true interdependence and
- (3) real shared accountability.

The best single criterion to use for determining whether a team or a work group is the best choice for a given situation is this: Does an incremental performance need or opportunity exist? What is important is to select the right kind of group, either work group or team, for each situation. One is not inherently better than the other. If an incremental performance need or opportunity exists, then a team is a potentially better choice. If it does not, then a work group is preferable. Teams have greater performance potential, but require more development and maintenance than work groups. It comes down to an issue of return on investment. It is also important to remember that return is measured not only in dollars, but in quality of work life and other intangibles which will ultimately, though not always immediately, affect the bottom line.

Examples of situations where real teams are needed are sports teams or emergency room trauma teams. For both of these, there is an incremental performance need or opportunity, true interdependency and shared accountability. If they are not functioning as real teams, the result will be disastrous.

Examples of situations where you often find work groups are: a functional department in an organization, or clerks in a department store, or waiters in a restaurant. In each one of these groups there can be similar individual objectives, but a lack of any small group common objective. There is some form of coordination or collaboration, but not necessarily shared accountability or interdependency. In each of these work group examples, if an incremental performance need or opportunity existed, then it would be worthwhile to explore the choice to become a real team with a common group objective, shared accountability, true interdependency and other real team attributes.

As mentioned above, the decision whether to become a real team or a work group should be made based on the advantages obtained versus the investment required.

In organizations we might also find pseudo teams, potential teams and high performance teams as described in the definitions above. Because of the many benefits that high performance teams bring to the organization, it is desirable to encourage and nurture them when they exist. Potential teams should be assisted to move toward real team functioning, since, by definition, an incremental performance need or opportunity exists. Pseudo-teams are very expensive to an organization because they consume resources without a commensurate return. A pseudo- team is better off moving toward either becoming a team or becoming a work group, whichever is most appropriate for the specific situation. For any of these changes to take place, it is necessary first to determine what the current status of the group is with respect to the possible kinds of groups that have been defined.

How to Determine What Kind of Group You Are or Should Be

This is a very important discussion, because it touches on the core of how group

members see themselves collectively, and of what they are potentially capable.

If a group or the organization's management has a blind spot about the kind of group it is, or simply fails to recognize this as an issue, there are significant consequences. In this situation, the group:

1. cannot determine whether they are properly organized to accomplish what the organization needs from them.
2. cannot correctly assess their performance potential.
3. cannot choose the appropriate strategies to manage or grow the group.

If it is not already clearly established what the current status of the group is, and what it aspires to be, then it is important to guide the group through a discussion on this subject. One helpful approach is to: list on a flip chart the following characteristics, explain them to the group and then attain a group consensus on the degree to which they apply for that group. Record for each characteristic the group's conclusion about the degree to which that characteristic applies to them. A scale from "totally" to "not at all" (6 to 1) would be appropriate as a measurement scale.

Characteristics List

1. There is a significant, incremental performance need or opportunity
2. There is joint commitment to a common mission
3. There is consensus on objectives
4. There is agreement on working approach
5. There is true interdependency
6. There is mutual accountability
7. Members are committed to one another's personal growth and success
8. It outperforms other like teams and outperforms performance expectations

Based on the discussion, determine what this group is. If item 1 does not apply, then the group needs to look at being a work group or something else, not a real team. If items 1 through 6 **all** apply, it is a team. If only some of these items are true, then it may be a potential team. If items 7 and 8 also apply, then it is a high performance team. The group must determine through discussion on these criteria both what it is and what it needs to be.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that many models suggest that only cross-functional groups can be teams. We do not support that view. Whether or not you are a real team depends upon the presence of an incremental performance need or opportunity, true interdependence, and shared accountability, not cross-functionality per se. You don't have to be a cross-functional group to be a real team. What is true, is that many incremental performance needs or opportunities require a cross-functional team approach to be addressed effectively. It is also helpful to remember that, while complementary of skills among team members may refer to differences in technical or functional skills that are job related (examples: marketing, engineering, computer technology, etc.), it can also refer to differences in more generically applicable skills such as problem-solving, decision-making and interpersonal skills.

It is also worth mentioning that the length of time a group will be in existence, or the permanency of its charter, are not generally appropriate criteria to determine its current or future status unless the time frame is so short that it would be impossible to create a real team. Short and long term groups, permanent or semi-permanent (membership may change) groups or temporary groups can be either teams or work groups.

In summary, one of the most powerful actions a group can take on behalf of itself and the organization is to determine what kind of group it currently is, and what kind it needs to be, to best serve the needs of the organization and its employees. This is a very powerful step in the group's development. Then the group can proceed with appropriate planning for its own development in concert with what the organization needs it to be and with an appropriate investment of developmental resources for the possible return.

Executive Evolution has a comprehensive group or team development process called T·E·A·M·S for assessment, development and continuous improvement which includes a software supported survey and comprehensive implementation and follow-up instructions. For more information please

For information on our approach to team development please click here

[Click Here](#)

Copyright, Marie J. Kane, 1997, 1998

Permission to copy and use granted subject to the bold Executive Evolution paragraph above and the copyright notice remaining intact in all cases.

Marie J. Kane is President of Executive Evolution; A corporate coaching and consulting firm established in 1981 that specializes in Executive Coaching,

Leadership and Management Development; Strategic Thinking; Team Effectiveness; Employee Selection/Retention and Relationship Improvement.
Info@ExecutiveEvolution.com 770-461-3820